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Thomas V. Gourlay

University of Notre Dame Australia, tom.gourlay@nd.edu.au

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Book Review

Educating in Christ: A Practical Handbook for Developing the Catholic Faith from Childhood to Adolescence—for Parents, Teachers, Catechists and School Administrators

Gerard O'Shea

Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press (2018)

290 pages; \$17.95 USD (paperback)

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<https://angelicopress.org/product/educating-in-christ/>

Reviewed by Thomas V. Gourlay

Every pedagogy implies an anthropology. This is the truism that underpins the great practical insight and theoretical wisdom of this book. Combining a broad range of experiential knowledge as an educator in a variety of levels and capacities with a profound grasp of traditional and contemporary theological, catechetical, and pedagogical research, Prof. Gerard O'Shea's *Educating in Christ* will no doubt be of tremendous value to parents, teachers, catechists, and school administrators.

O'Shea begins his book with a thoroughgoing yet easily accessible chapter explaining how one's conception of the human person, both philosophical and theological anthropology, affect the processes of learning and teaching. As he points out, this is particularly important for the kind of learning and teaching under examination, namely catechesis. O'Shea makes a compelling case for a theological anthropology that is at once Trinitarian and Christocentric, grounding his anthropology in the phrase that shaped the teaching pontificate of pope St John Paul II from the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, "Christ reveals man to man himself" (p. 22). The supernatural end, or *telos*, of the human person is neatly encapsulated in the subtitle to his introductory chapter, "[T]hrough Christ, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, to the Father." This direction underpins the entire project of catechesis as conceived of by the Church, and so eloquently detailed in this book.

After laying the groundwork, O'Shea makes a passing reference inadequate to approaches to catechesis that have been in ascendancy over the last few decades. The modern tendency to reduce the human person to nothing other than a thinking thing has had a drastically deleterious impact on catechesis and brought about disastrous outcomes on the burgeoning faith of young people. Even if we get the content 100% correct, if our pedagogical approach does not respect the nature of the human child subject to our "teaching," our catechesis will be inadequate at best. For O'Shea, this rationalistic conception of the nature and purpose of catechesis is the first of two extremes that are noticeable in any survey of catechetical endeavours over the last 40-50 years. Sitting at the other extreme is a sentimentalised conception of catechesis that conceives of the purpose of catechesis as the simple eliciting of merely emotive responses. O'Shea, relying on a masterful command of all of the relevant Church documents together with the theoretical writings of such Catholic luminaries as Blessed John Henry Newman and Pope Benedict XVI, shows that the human person images God analogously in the threefold aspect of its nature: the level of the senses, the level of the heart, and finally the level of the intellect.

Throughout, O'Shea draws heavily on the pedagogical insights of Maria Montessori, and those who followed in her wake applying these insights more specifically to catechesis—namely Sophia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi. A substantive portion of this book is devoted to demonstrating how the developmental stages or sensitive periods identified by Montessori function in the life of a child must be adequately attended to in the catechesis offered. O'Shea's theoretically rich yet practically grounded work puts him in company with not only those whom he cites frequently, (i.e. Thomas, Newman, Benedict XVI, Montessori, Cavalletti, and Gobbi), but other important personalities, both teachers and theorists in this field, including Luigi Giusani, and Stratford Caldecott.

O'Shea argues that, in any meaningful catechetical approach, it is important that the catechist begins with the fact that the child first comes to experience reality via the senses, then he or she will come to love reality, and only then will the child be ready to ask questions and to learn. The great exemplar here is the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, designed by Cavalletti and Gobbi, using the pedagogical insights of Montessori. Whether using this program or something else, the task of the catechist according to O'Shea is to follow this pattern that built is into human nature and so eloquently articulated by Montessori. This three-fold methodology, if it can be so-called,

respects the integrity both of the learner and of the thing learned—something important in every academic discipline, but most especially in the realm of catechesis and faith formation.

Of particular note is the final chapter of the book where O’Shea offers a comprehensive thematic overview of the relevant church documents on education and catechesis. This will prove to be of significant value to school principals, administrators, and those charged with ongoing staff formation and the maintenance of the Catholic school’s Catholicity. It provides a ready reference that will no doubt be used as both a launch pad into, and a guide through the larger and sometimes less accessible documents that should direct the work of catechists, religious education teachers, and Catholic educators more generally. This survey will also prove useful to students in pre-service teacher formation programs seeking to grasp the essentials of the Church’s specific teaching in this area.

This book is highly impressive on a number of fronts, but most particularly in terms of its synthetic achievement drawing together a vast array of research from a variety of disciplines into a readable and eminently practical handbook for educators of all sorts. Indeed, O’Shea is that rare author who combines rigorous theological acumen, powerful command of cutting-edge educational and pedagogical research, as well as significant first-hand practical experience as a teacher, catechist, and parent. What ties this together, making the book even more valuable, is the obvious prayerful concern that lies at the core of the book, that children come to know and to love God.